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SUBJECT: DE CREM: NO MANDATE FOR BELGIAN SOLDIERS ON THE GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN OUTSIDE TRAINING MISSION, F-16'S

REF: BRUSSELS 1366

¶1. (U) The Belgian public's tolerance for putting any of its soldiers in harm's way was tested by the September 3 death of a Belgian "blue helmet" soldier in Lebanon, who was engaged in a de-mining operation. Responding to such sensitivities, Belgian Defense Minister De Crem was obliged to take issue with General Eddy Testelmans, who told reporters on September 3 that he hopes a successful mission by the four Belgian F-16's in Kandahar could lay the groundwork for the presence of ground troops in Afghanistan, beyond what has already been approved by the government (reftel). De Crem hastened to assure that "Belgium has no intention to deploy troops on the ground in the South of Afghanistan." While the government early in 2008 approved the stationing of 60-70 troops only as an "Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT)" in Kunduz, in Northern Afghanistan, Testelmans had openly envisaged a scenario where the Belgian trainers might follow their trainees into combat elsewhere in the country. The OMLT troops are expected to arrive in February, pending final approval by the government. They will work alongside German troops. De Crem has described them as "training, not fighting troops".

¶2. (U) De Crem nevertheless underlined the significance of the OMLT troops to both the government of Belgium as a NATO member and to Afghanistan's needs for security and reconstruction. He criticized those in Brussels who decried human rights violations by the Taliban, especially against women, but who now refuse to support Belgium's mission in Afghanistan. Although De Crem was clearly not pleased with his outspoken general, he recognized the general's right to speak his mind even as a military man. "There were times when that was profoundly different," he added, getting in a dig at his predecessor and oftentimes critic, Andre Flahaut. He added, "General Testelmans has given his views, but it is clear in this country that it is the government that decides."

¶3. (SBU) Comment: De Crem's visit to Afghanistan has not quite provided the unalloyed positive PR he was looking for. He missed the arrival of the F-16's in Kandahar when his own military flight into the country was delayed. Now, on the ground in Afghanistan, he has had to publicly rein in one of his top generals, who is more ready to take on a dangerous mission than most politicians back in Brussels. End Comment.

FOX

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